

Studies in English

Volume 6

Article 11

1965

A Source of Faulkner's Fable

Allen Cabaniss

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cabaniss, Allen (1965) "A Source of Faulkner's Fable," *Studies in English*: Vol. 6 , Article 11.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol6/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

A SOURCE OF FAULKNER'S FABLE

by Allen Cabaniss

(A version of this paper, kindly translated for me by Professor François Bucher, appeared as "Eine Quelle zu Faulkners 'Die Fabel'" in *Schweizer Monatshefte* for December 1957.)

There is no reasonable doubt that *A Fable* by William Faulkner¹ is modeled, in part, on the records of the last week of Christ's earthly life. The crosses on the cover and at the beginning of each chapter (as well as at the beginning of each section), the headings according to the days of one week, the succession of events (e. g., a "last supper," execution of a hero between two criminals, the burial and disappearance of a body), the characters themselves (e. g., thirteen soldiers of whom one is a traitor and another is thirty-three years old, the two sisters Mary and Martha) — all point to the traditional account of Holy Week.

Although good taste may enter a *caveat*, there is no dogmatic objection to parody as such, only to the manner in which it may be set forth. After all, such stories as the Hiramic, Arthurian, and Grail legends are also patterned after certain events in the life of Christ, but the treatments are reverent. On the other hand, pagan parodies like Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Lucian of Samosata's *Death of Peregrinus*, and Celsus's *True Discourse* are satirical and impious.² It happens that two details in *A Fable* display a remarkable affinity to one of the oldest and most blasphemous parodies ever written about Christ, an ancient Jewish canard, the *Toldoth Jeshu*.³

¹William Faulkner, *A Fable* (New York: Random House, 1954). All my references are to this edition.

²Cf. Philostratus (*fl. ca. A. D. 200*), *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Bonybeare, 2 vol. (London: Heinemann, 1917-21) and "De morte Peregrini," trans. A. M. Harmon, *Lucian's Opera*, V (London: Heinemann, 1936), 2-51; both in the Loeb Classical Library series. Celsus's book is lost but much of it is incorporated in the famous reply of Origen (d. 254), *Contra Celsum*, translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 395-669. Lucian also *fl. ca. 200*.

³I use the translation of the *Toldoth Jeshu* as it appears in Hugh J. Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews* (London: Duckworth, 1937), pp. 35-61. Further references will be by chapter and verse as indicated by Schonfield.

The first is the attribution of the hero's birth to an illicit relationship. Faulkner presents his protagonist as the bastard son of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces.⁴ The *Toldoth Jeshu* states that Mary was seduced by a warrior of fair appearance named Joseph son of Pandera.⁵ (Celsus gives the name of the soldier as Pandera. Jesus would therefore be Ben Pandera, a name by which he is indeed known in rabbinical literature.) In the case of Faulkner's *A Fable* this could be an entirely fortuitous resemblance. Since the novel is a war story there is no need for any reason other than coincidence to be involved here.

The situation is somewhat different in the second detail. Faulkner's executed protagonist is taken by his relatives and buried on the old home place, a farm, in the field beneath a beech tree.⁶ The inference is clear that the grave was dug in what was (four years earlier) land that had been plowed and planted. Although the body was dislodged and displaced during a bombardment, it was reburied by the same bombardment about fifty meters away in another field. It was there rediscovered about a year later by a farmer as he plowed his land in the spring.⁷ In the *Toldoth Jeshu* the body of Christ was buried by his disciples, but a gardener removed it and carried it to his own garden lest the Christians steal it and claim that Christ had risen from the dead. There the gardener had diverted an irrigation canal, buried the body, and returned the waters to their channel. After an appointed lapse of time he made known his secret to the great discomfiture of the Christians.⁸ Tertullian reports that Jewish polemic claimed that the gardener removed the body of Jesus lest his lettuces be trampled by the throng of visitors.⁹ A still later version given by Agobard, a ninth-century bishop of Lyons, says that, according to the Jews, the body of Christ had been buried near an aqueduct and had been washed away by a sudden freshet. A year-long search had failed to produce the body and Pilate had therefore proclaimed Christ risen and worthy of divine honors.¹⁰

⁴A *Fable*, p. 301 and elsewhere.

⁵I, 5-21 (Schonfield, *op. cit.*, 35f.).

⁶A *Fable*, p. 397.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 421, 423 f.

⁸V, 10-23 (Schonfield, *op. cit.*, 52 f.).

⁹Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, xxx, *ad fin.*; see edition and translation by T. R. Glover in the Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 298.

¹⁰See summary in my *Agobard of Lyons: Churchman and Critic* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1953), p. 68.

A few minor details may be added in confirmation. In Faulkner, when the protagonist is shot, the entire post to which he was bound collapsed with the body.¹¹ In the *Toldoth Jeshu* the execution of Christ was delayed several times because every tree brought forward to be used broke through magic. Finally the stock of a carob tree was found to resist the spell.¹² In Faulkner, moreover, the ecclesiastical organization of Christianity is attributed to Paul, not to Christ.¹³ The *Toldoth Jeshu* makes the same point in the same crude manner.¹⁴ (It can, of course, be made quite legitimately, but only in a subtle way.)

It seems fairly certain then that there is some relation between the Faulkner *Fable* and the garbled polemic of or derived from the *Toldoth Jeshu*. The implications of this relationship must await discussion in a theological milieu.¹⁵

¹¹A *Fable*, p. 385.

¹²IV, 20-23 (Schonfield, *op. cit.*, 50).

¹³A *Fable*, pp. 363-365.

¹⁴VI, 13-41 (Schonfield, *op. cit.*, 55-58).

¹⁵Faulkner may have been paving the way for a massive attack on Christianity. That seems to be indicated not only by intimations in *A Fable*, but also by a statement originally made in Manila in 1955 and repeated in "American Segregation and the World Crisis" [William Faulkner, Benjamin E. Mays, and Cecil Sims, *The Segregation Decision* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1956), p. 10]: "Because it is glib and simple, we like to think of the world situation today as a . . . balance of two irreconcilable ideologies confronting each other That's not so. Only one of the forces is an ideology, an idea. Because the second force is the simple fact of Man" By implication he discredits the only force which has consistently and from the very beginning "confronted" Communism, namely, Christianity. And if Christianity is not an ideology (although the customary word is *theology*), it is nothing. Did Faulkner intend to elaborate such a position? *A Fable* suggests that he was moving in that direction.